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SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

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SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:  
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Mideast

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Key stories in the media:  
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The leading Hebrew-language newspapers this morning highlighted several major stories. At the top of the agenda was the arrest warrant issued by a British court against Opposition Head Tzipi Livni for alleged war crimes during Operation Cast Lead. Also making

headlines were Finance Minister Steinitz's remarks against the Israeli judicial system.

Ma'ariv reported that the warrant against Livni was subsequently withdrawn after it became evident that the former Israeli foreign minister was not on British soil, as suspected. Yediot Aharonot reports about a furious reaction by Israeli officials to the news, quoting an unnamed senior political official as saying: "The British legal system, with the support of the British Government, have created an absurd situation in which senior Israeli officials cannot visit Britain any longer...By so doing, Britain has disqualified itself from playing a decisive role in the peace process in the Middle East. Furthermore, despite clear promises that were made by senior British politicians that they would not allow Israeli personages to be harassed by pro-Palestinian elements, it now has become clear that those were empty promises." According to that report, Israeli Ambassador to the UK Ron Prosor sought an urgent meeting last night with British Foreign Secretary David Miliband in order to convey the gravity with which Israel views this development.

All newspapers highlighted the remarks made by Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz yesterday, who criticized the Israeli High Court of Justice for issuing rulings that are financially crippling for the Israeli economy, suggesting that a different ruling process should be implemented.

In a follow-up story from yesterday's decision, Yediot Aharonot reports on the practical implications of the decision to remove the Har Bracha yeshiva from the special integrative program, noting that current and prospective students will now be informed that if they choose to stay at Har Bracha they will be obliged to serve three full and consecutive years of military service. If they wish to integrate yeshiva studies with their military service by means of the hesder program, it will be incumbent upon them to register with one of the other seminaries.

The Jerusalem Post reported this morning that a fifth battalion of Palestinian security forces, trained in Jordan under United States sponsorship, will return to the West Bank next week to beef up PA forces in cracking down on Hamas infrastructure.

Block Quotes:

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Mideast:

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II. "Netanyahu and Barak must stand strong against right-wing yeshiva"

The independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz editorialized (12/15): "Barak's decision ... does not release the IDF from its problematic arrangement with the yeshivas, which have become a right-wing bastion in combat units and whose students view their rabbis as a parallel source of authority to their commanding officers.... This is the first time the defense establishment ... has set a "price tag" for rabbis who undermine the foundations of democracy and tell their students which orders to obey and which to refuse. The support for Melamed among the heads of other hesder yeshivas ... shows the grave danger of creating within the army a private militia of the extreme right, subservient to the directives of the rabbis. Barak must therefore stand strong. He must not give in to pressure or be enticed into compromises and mediation. The cancellation of the arrangement ... must be a precedent and a warning to other yeshivas and their heads. But this battle cannot be left solely to the defense minister and the army. The prime minister must make it clear that he will not accept breaches of discipline or of the army's subservience to the elected civilian leadership - not even in the name of the ideology of the greater land of Israel. If he hesitates, he will do fatal damage to Israeli democracy."

II. "Hamas at 22"

The conservative, independent Jerusalem Post editorialized (12/14): "Time flies when you're spilling blood. Tens of thousands of

Palestinians packed a Gaza City square yesterday to mark the anniversary and heard Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh pledge... that Hamas would never make peace with Israel. All in all, it has been a decent year for Hamas. Much of its leadership survived Operation Cast Lead.... It did not find it too hard to replace tons of lost weapons ... and reconstitute its cadre of commanders. Egypt is plainly unable ... to stop the smuggling.... Hamas also managed to keep Gilad Schalit's whereabouts secret from IDF intelligence.... The military setbacks suffered by Hamas ... were more than offset by a cornucopia of diplomatic benefits thanks to the Goldstone Report.... Divided between Fatah and Hamas, the Palestinian polity is immobilized.... If the Netanyahu government assents to a lop-sided prisoner release, Hamas's strength and Fatah's weakness will become even more pronounced. Given that Israel is not prepared to seize the Gaza Strip ... and that neither Palestinian elections nor a Palestinian unity government would solve the Hamas problem, ... Nathan Brown of the Carnegie Middle East Center wonders if perhaps Israel should not explore a Machiavellian modus vivendi with the Islamists. It is an approach some Israeli strategists ... would be prepared to consider ... if only Hamas would stop reminding us ... that "the liberation of the Strip is just a step to liberating all of Palestine."

CUNNINGHAM